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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/03/2019

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SUBJECT: SURPRISE TOP BRASS SHAKEUP: MILITARY CRIES FOUL

REF: IIR 311241Z AUG 04

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Deborah Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (U) On September 2, President Topi's office announced several dismissals and appointments in the top ranks of the military. Current commander of Naval Command Captain Kristaq Gerveni was appointed Deputy Chief of the General Staff (DCHOD), a position that has been vacant since July, when previous DCHOD BG Dushku was appointed Commander of the multinational Southeast Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG). Rear Admiral Kudret Cela was appointed to replace Gerveni as commander of Naval Command. Brigadier General Vladimir Qiriazi was dismissed as commander of Logistics Command and appointed deputy commander of Joint Forces Command. No appointment was made to replace Qiriazi at Logistics Command.

¶2. (C) In the press release, President Topi claims to have made these appointments at the request of the Minister of Defense. Several of Post's contacts in the Ministry of Defense (MoD), including Chief of the General Staff (CHOD) BG Maksim Malaj, have told Post they had no previous knowledge of the reshuffle. Indeed, BG Malaj expressed his outrage that he was not consulted on any of these appointments. While the President is Commander and Chief of the Albanian Armed Forces (AAF) and has the right to dismiss and appoint whomever he wants, it is unusual that he would do so without consulting the military at all.

¶3. (C) Several aspects of the appointments cause concern. First, Captain Gerveni is filling a position usually filled by a Brigadier General (Rear Admiral) or higher. While a very able officer and supportive of reform, Gerveni was not on this year's list for promotion. (Note. There are unconfirmed rumors that he is being rewarded for his successful negotiations with the Government of Greece over the demarcation of the shared sea border. The agreement is believed to have helped convince Greece to ratify Albania's NATO membership. End Note.) Gerveni will be commanding a Naval Commander (Rear Admiral Cela) who outranks him. Admiral Cela has not had a command position since approximately five years ago, when he was dismissed from this same position for unknown reasons (speculation revolved around disputes over illegal construction or property disputes - see reftel).

¶4. (C) Most disconcerting, BG Qiriazi's reassignment is an obvious demotion to a position normally filled by a colonel in a command that is likely to be dissolved in the near future. Several sources in the MoD, including the CHOD, have speculated that the demotion is punishment over a property dispute. The property, in downtown Tirana, is home to the Dinamo Soccer Stadium and is owned by the military. Sources

claim that someone close to the Prime Minister, President and/or Minister is seeking to buy this property, but that Qiriazhi has refused to sign papers deeding the property to private hands.

COMMENT

15. (C) As commander of Logistics Command, Qiriazhi's support for demilitarization will be missed. However, more concerning is the lack of transparency in these appointments, their possible punitive nature and potential links to corruption. Unfortunately, it is still common practice throughout the Albanian Government for appointment decisions at every level to be made unilaterally from the top without consultation, a practice which inhibits the development of a professional cadre of civil servants and military officers.

JONES